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# Exploration and Discovery.

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## THE VAPOR BATH OF GHANTUR.

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One of the most interesting natural phenomena in Syria is the vapor bath, situated about four hours distant to the north of Karyateyn, the last town on the border of the desert toward Palmyra. It is unnamed in Baedeker, but generally goes by the name of Ghantur, the nearest village, an hour distant from it to the west. We had an opportunity to visit the place in the summer of 1891, when, at Karyateyn, we found our way to Palmyra barred by cholera quarantine. An entire day was needed to go and return unless one would choose to put up for the night at the dirty little village of Ghantur, where the accommodations were said to be very limited and the people not over trustworthy.

We made an early start, taking for our guide and escort the entire Protestant church of Karyateyn, in the shape of one little old man, who for many years had been the sole resident representative of that sect in this city of five thousand inhabitants. The church went on foot, but had with it its little donkey carrying a skin of fresh water to serve us for a douche after our bath, and as the skin would be empty on the return, the church would then be able to ride.

The road first climbs out of the valley of Karyateyn to the top of one of the long parallel ranges of hills by which this part of the country is traversed; from which point we can see a white spot across the next valley at the base of the next range of hills three hours away. This marks the site of the vapor bath; so with this in view, we can leave the guide to follow while we make better time on our horses across the plain.

The extensive ruins on the hill, around and over the bath, indicate that it was once a place of considerable importance as a health cure, though apparently never a place of residence. The most striking feature of the ruins is a small tower, fairly well preserved, standing on the brow of the hill facing to the south and west, apparently a conning tower, with strong walls pierced with narrow window slits bevelled in the usual way to give greater range to a marksman looking or shooting from within. The tower seems to have formed a bastion for a larger defensive structure just behind it, of which there remain only the materials scattered over the ground. The orifice

through which the vapor now escapes is in a small chamber closely connected with this part of the ruins, but a little above toward the top of the hill, while what seems to have been the bath proper lies to the left a little lower down. This latter consists of several chambers sunk like cellars to a considerable depth below the natural surface, with vaulted roofs supported on pillars, some of which yet remain. The walls and ceiling were smoothly finished with cement, still at places well preserved. The character of the floor could not be determined as the chambers are filled to some depth with the debris of the roof, washings from the higher levels, and accumulations of deposits from sheep and cattle, such as form the floor of almost every cave or abandoned chamber in the pastoral parts of Syria, not to speak of many dwellings, the protection of whose hospitable roofs is still shared by human beings. These plastered chambers were undoubtedly the bath proper and the waiting rooms, where the bathers could cool off in successive apartments of diminishing temperature. The vapor was probably conducted to them from the main source by conduits now hidden by the accumulation on the floors, and may have been introduced to different chambers at different temperatures, passing perhaps from one to another.

Crowning the hill above the bath is a distinct mass of ruins almost level with the ground, which may have been a temple to the god of the healing art, the patron saint of gout and rheumatism; and somewhere here should be sought also the dwellings of the attendants.

Turning now to take our bath, we find the present outlet of the vapor in a small vaulted chamber not more than nine feet square, whose roof, pierced by a small central opening, is in a fair state of preservation, but whose floor and doorway are so filled in with accumulations of earth that one in entering must stoop almost on hands and knees to pass under the lintel. Once inside there is hardly room to stand erect. The earthen floor slopes a little from all sides toward the center, where a stone is seen, from which, by an orifice about nine inches in diameter, the vapor rises and fills the chamber, escaping thence by the hole in the ceiling and the door-way. The stones of the wall and ceiling are beaded and dripping with perspiration, and the floor, in consequence, is damp but solid. One or two flat stones serve for a cleaner standing place than the general floor. The current of vapor is strong and steady, and a handkerchief placed in it rises at once to the ceiling. A stone dropped into the hole strikes once or twice and is then lost to hearing. We were told that an effort had been made to sound it, but three or four long packing ropes (such as are used by muleteers), spliced together, with a weight on the end, had failed to find a bottom.

We had no instrument with which to measure the temperature, but the heat on first entering was almost unbearable. It was particularly painful to the softer, moister parts of the body, such as the eyes and lips and inner linings of the nose and mouth. The effect on entering was immediate. The entire body broke out in profuse perspiration, which blinded the eyes and ran

in streams from every finger tip, while the epidermis lost its hold and departed with such rapidity as to suggest the serious question how long this "shuffling off" of the "mortal coil" might continue and there still be anything left of us. However that might be, a half minute in this torture chamber was enough for the first ordeal, and when we came out from a second bath of a minute's duration, we felt as Naaman must have felt after his seventh dip in Jordan, cleaner than he had ever been before in his life, and his flesh "like the flesh of a little child." And this thought naturally introduces other suggestions as serious as the question suggested above. For the bath of Ghanthur has long been famous as a cure not only for gout and rheumatism, but for skin diseases, and the grewsome thought came to us as we crouched in that low-roofed chamber, how many germs of skin diseases, perhaps even of leprosy, are but slightly prisoned in this accumulation we call the floor.

The present condition of this chamber, and the lowness of the lintel and ceiling give reason to believe that the accumulation of earth on its floor is from three to five feet in depth. If this is so, the rock at the center, toward which the floor now slopes and in which is the orifice, may be the top of a pillar corresponding in purpose to the "tripod" on which the priestess of Delphi sat for inspiration in delivering her oracles. The probability of this, and that this chamber was the oracular shrine is implied by the smallness of the chamber and by its situation, not in connection with the common bath chambers but above them and immediately between the fortress and what I have called the temple. That this was a tripod is implied in what we were told at Karyateyn, that if anyone would seat himself squarely upon the opening so as to effectually stop the flow of the vapor, it would not burn him. This, apparently, was a current remark among the people, and has probably been handed down from earlier times, and if this were a tripod, such a feat would be easily possible, but as the floor now lies it could not be done. Apart, however, from the question of its practicability, the process of taking one's seat so as to effectually close the opening in order not to get burned, resembled too much the heroic task of "belling the cat," and we preferred, in accepting the statement, to walk by faith, not by feeling. It is said that the priestess at Delphi, in giving her oracles, sat upon the tripod over a chasm in the earth whence fumes arising from the lower regions affected her brain and inspired her prophecies. If she had to take her seat over a vapor as hot as this at Ghanthur, it is not surprising that the gentle maiden felt moved at times to utter some ambiguous remarks.

In local tradition the origin of this wonderful bath is ascribed to King Solomon, who employed the *ginns* in the construction of a conduit under the Anti-Lebanon mountains, by which the water for it is brought a distance of three days' journey from the pool of Ras-el-'Ain at Baalbec. And to these *ginns* he committed the management of the underground fireworks by which the water is here converted into vapor. There may be a connection between this tradition and that which ascribes to Solomon, by an inference from 1 Kings

9:18, the building of Palmyra (Arabic, *Tadmur*), and this connection would be strengthened by the related phenomena, the warm sulphur springs near Palmyra. These and the bath near Ghanfur would be stations along the same underground conduit, by which, according to tradition, Solomon sought to supply the city "in the wilderness" from the crystal fountain of Ras-el-'Ain.

It is to be hoped that some systematic study of these ruins near Ghanfur will some time be made, to ascertain if any of the stones bear inscriptions, and if the conjectures here made as to the conduits and a tripod are correct. A scientific investigation into the physical phenomena would also be interesting, and it should be possible to find in Syriac and Byzantine records some historical notices of a place once so important. The neighboring country abounds in ruins of towns and villages, adorned with temples and churches, showing that what is now a wilderness was once a populous and prosperous section of the country, capable of appreciating and generously supporting such a valuable institution.